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Ensemble Espanol pushing Spanish dance into the 21st century



Irma Suarez Ruiz in "Mar de Fuego," with elements that give this piece a cutting-edge feel that is also, somehow, timeless. (Dean Paul photo)



[Lauren Warnecke](#) Chicago Tribune

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Ensemble Espanol ends each season — of which there have now been 42 — with “Flamenco Passion,” the main attraction of the annual American Spanish Dance & Music Festival at Skokie’s North Shore Center for the Performing Arts.

This year, the theme of the festival is the life and work of Jose Greco. Greco was a legendary Spanish dancer, largely credited with popularizing Spanish dance in America. In 1949, Greco founded the Jose Greco Dance Company, which toured extensively across the U.S. and abroad. He would have celebrated his 100th birthday this year.

During a stop in Chicago, 18-year-old Libby Komaiko went to watch a friend audition for Greco’s company, only to find herself on the roster by the end of the

day. Komaiko launched her own company in 1976, Ensemble Espanol Spanish Dance Theater.

So Komaiko's personal connection to Greco makes it even more significant that her company, now under the direction of former pupils Jorge Perez and Irma Suarez Ruiz, is being entrusted with preserving Greco's legacy. What makes this particular tribute so special, however, is the appearance of three of Greco's children (Jose II, Lola and Carmela), in their first performance together since Greco's death in 2000.

After a video introduction (edited by Miguel Garcia), Jose Greco II appears onstage in a tight spotlight. He pops a knee, snaps his fingers, walks regally across the stage and raises his arms to shoulder height, all with a furrowed brow and a taut cheek turned to the audience. It is the beginning of "Zambra Farruca," a solo Greco Sr. made in 1950. When a dancer has stage presence like this, he almost doesn't have to do anything to draw your attention. But honestly, I never expected the agility and verve delivered by these seasoned siblings.

Video clips from Greco's film and TV appearances served as transitions between re-creations of works he or his dance partner, Argentinita, produced. Tucked in the middle of this montage is a performance by Lola Greco, a stunning solo with a fringed shawl serving as her dance partner. The more dated of these pieces — specifically "La Castellana," which is about a macho Castilian flirting with two ladies, and Argentinita's "Anda Jaleo" — are smartly layered with video footage of Greco dancing the same works as his children performed them.

The act ends with Komaiko's signature work, "Bolero," which premiered 25 years ago this season. I was happy to see this frequent closer nestled into the middle of the performance, and particularly for its clever placement within this tribute. Video of Greco dancing his own version of "Bolero" played behind the opening tableau of five women seated upstage as Maurice Ravel's incessant, repetitive phrases ensued. Better to have stayed with these images of Greco throughout the piece, I think, than to resort back to the tired projections of overlapping Picasso paintings, which typically accompany this dance. And while "Bolero" is an exciting crowd-pleaser that is always fun to watch — and wholly appropriate in this context — it could benefit from a few seasons on the shelf.

So, the first half of "Flamenco Passion" was about the past, but the second was all about now, with the world premiere of Carlos Rodriguez's "Mar de Fuego" (Sea of Fire). Rodriguez, who co-founded Madrid's Nuevo Ballet Espanol with creative

partner Angel Rojas, is quickly becoming a favorite choreographer of this company. Rodriguez and Rojas created “Iroko” in 2016, and if you liked that piece for its fusion of classical and contemporary style, you’ll love this one.

“Mar de Fuego” is inspired by the Red Thread of Fate, an East Asian legend about spirits bound across time and place (what Americans might call a soul mate). The piece opens with a faceless, shirtless figure (Michael Young), who reappears throughout the ballet as a mysterious, unifying force connecting what might otherwise feel like disparate, plotless sections of dancing.

As with “Iroko,” there is a loose narrative to this piece (and an impressive number of costume changes), but the continuity of how each look works together is more effective here in “Mar de Fuego.” That is thanks, in large part, to the contributions of lighting designer Luis Perdiguero, whose mix of old and new technologies — contrasting piercing, fluorescent LED down pools and geometric floor pattern with a garnet red backdrop and vintage Edison bulbs dangling from the rafters — give this piece a cutting-edge feel that is also, somehow, timeless.

In the larger context of this performance, I saw the metaphor of the red thread as a nod to the dance lineage that had so thoughtfully been laid out in the evening’s first half. That makes “Mar de Fuego” sound like a really boring dance, and it’s definitely not that. Rodriguez is comfortably pushing Spanish dance into the 21st century, evolving the form in innovative and fascinating ways through his creative movement invention and beautiful imagery. And I think Rodriguez is hoping audience members take a more literal interpretation of the red thread’s meaning about romantic partners finding one another. They should — this piece is hot.

Lauren Warnecke is a freelance critic.

(3 stars. out of 4)

Review: “Ensemble Espanol in “Flamenco Passion”

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday

Where: North Shore Center for the Performing Arts, 9501 Skokie Blvd., Skokie

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes

Tickets: \$20-\$50 at 847-673-6300 and www.northshorecenter.org